

PRAYING THE PSALMS 2025

Session III: New Orientation

3. A range of human emotion is presented without criticism. Here we can acknowledge that we can all have angry and destructive feelings and that it is important to 'get these out', and doing so in prayer is a 'safe place'.

Before we move on into Book III, let me remind you of the overall story the Psalms tell, and suggest that this overall story can be seen in terms of Brueggemann's pattern. The old orientation or pattern was that of kingship and temple, which is celebrated in the Royal Psalms which populate Books I and II (2, 18, 20, 21, 45 and 72).

But this was all lost when Jerusalem fell and Israel went into the disorientation and questioning of exile. This experience begins to be articulated in Book III, most acutely through Psalms 74 and 79, written in the midst of the ruins of the temple, and in Psalms 88 and 89 which both grapple with despair.

In Book IV hope of a new future bursts onto the scene through the enthronement Psalms of the 90's; not through the Persian Emperor Cyrus, as in the prophets, but in the person of Godself. We've seen this enacted by Jesus in his home synagogue at Nazareth, where he embraced the scriptural role of God's servant and king, who brings about justice for the poor.

The new orientation of Israel's life with God begins to emerge in Book V of the Psalms, most obviously through the Passover Psalms

(113-118), the magisterial Psalm 119, the Pilgrimage Psalms (120-132) and the final climactic doxology of Psalms 146-150. It is not difficult to see how this move from old through disorientation to new, is also expressed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Let us finish with the Jim Cotter's prayer written to follow Psalm 39:

Prayer: O God, of mysterious anger, may we not think of you as destructive as we are in our rage, but recognise your piercing heat and light serving the truth, your fiercely loving anger overwhelming our murdering and mortality. Amen.

The Next Week: We have been reflecting this session on the shocking range of human emotions that the Psalms bring to God. As you pray through the Psalms set for the next week, make a note of the emotions that are expressed.

***Last Time:** Last session we focused upon the Psalms of lament, or as Brueggemann frames it: disorientation. We took Psalm 22 as a case study and noted the connections with Luke's account of Jesus' crucifixion. We noted the movement of the Psalms of Lament from plea to praise; anticipating the resurrection beyond Jesus' crucifixion.*

We reflected on those psalms of orientation which we'd come across thus far; including Psalm 119 which we are now reading our way through. Let's use tonight's section as our opening prayer:

Read Psalm 119v57-64

It is not that suffering and injustice are absent from such psalms of orientation, more that this chaos is kept in place by God's presence and power.

In the psalms of lament that chaos has broken through and become undeniably close; as we touched on last week, such psalms are a powerful tool to facilitate truthfulness, and thereby inclusiveness, in the church today.

New Orientation: Did you notice the psalms of 'New Orientation' in this week's selection?

Psalm 29, which thunders God's power and presence (v3-9);
Psalm 30, which celebrates how God lifted the Psalmist out of the depths (v1).
Psalm 33, which declares God's creative and justice-making power (v4-11).
Psalm 34, which bubbles up in gratitude for God's deliverance (v6-7).

The more declarative a Psalm is, the more it expresses a new orientation.

Let's turn to Psalm 40, as another example of a psalm of New Orientation:

Read Psalm 40 [Ps 40v13-17 = Ps 70]

Psalm 40 is unusual because it moves from praise to plea, doesn't it? In the first half (v1-10) the Psalmist gives thanks that God has '*heard my cry*' (v1), sings a '*new song*' (v3), joyfully vows to serve God (6-8) and witnesses to others (v9-10).

Yet in the second half (v11-17), the psalm turns to a new experience of threat (v14), and ends – rather than starts – with a plea for God's help.

The Psalmist clearly feels that they are God's servant, delighting to walk in God's way, and that – in some way – they are doing so in fulfilment of scripture. (*Ps 40v7-8*)

"Then I said, 'Here I am: in the scroll of the book it is written of me.' I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart."

This is precisely what we find in our gospel reading for this week.

Read Luke 4v14-30

Conversation: *together or in smaller groups.*

1. How significant is it that this passage follows Jesus' 'testing' in the wilderness?
2. How important is it to root the 'the new thing' in the old story?

The 'new orientation' evident in Jesus' ministry was what he called 'the kingdom of God'; and immediately we remember that, with reference to Psalm 2 and Jesus' baptism, this was a kingdom over which Jesus had been anointed King. This kingdom, like the Psalms as a whole, is good news for the poor.

Although this appears to be a 'high point' for Jesus in his ministry, we've noted that the passage is preceded by his temptation and is immediately followed by his being run out of town.

That follows the pattern which we noted in Psalm 40; moving from joyful testimony of God's goodness, to fresh pleas for God's saving help.

Read Psalm 41

The Psalmist is still being slandered (v6-8), coming – most painfully – from a close friend (v9). Yet it is written from the perspective of God's deliverance. The new perspective that the psalmist appears to have learned is that the Lord is pleased with him because '*he has regard for the weak (or poor)*' (v1). The Psalmist stands on the rock of his integrity (v12), knowing that God will uphold him or her (v12). Fittingly, following this affirmation, there follows a doxology which brings the first book of Psalms to a close:

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen." (v13)

Problems and Objections:

Psalm 41 contains one of those troubling voices; in this case a voice of revenge:

"Raise me up, that I may repay them." (v10)

That's different than imploring God to repay them for their evil ways, isn't it? (eg Ps 59v5)

Or allowing the evil people's plots to '*recoil on them*' (eg Ps 54v3 and elsewhere).

Such voices of violent revenge reach their rock bottom in the words of Psalm 137 where – looking back on the violence suffered during the fall of Jerusalem – the Psalmist rages: (v8-9)

"Happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us – he who seizes your infants and dashed them against the rocks."

Conversation: *together or in smaller groups.*

1. What do we do with such texts?
2. Short of editing them out, how might we read/pray them?

Jim Cotter, in his introduction to the Psalms in 'Out of the Silence', highlights three particular problems that we may have with the Psalms, and more widely with the Old Testament:

1. They present God as acting violently and ordering wholesale slaughter. In the light of Christ, we believe that God cares passionately about justice but chooses not to act violently.

2. The Psalms can encourage Israel (and by extension the people of God) to believe that they have been chosen for privilege and status. Sometimes the temptation to see chosen-ness as privilege is focused most acutely in the person and role of the King. You'll find that in the coming week when you come to Psalm 45. Jim Cotter suggests that this psalm is best prayed on behalf of those in power; asking that they use such power for service, not for privilege.